Morton A. Kaplan: Transcending Postmodernism

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In Memoriam Morton A. Kaplan (1921-2017)

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I first approached Morton Kaplan in April 2008, a year and a half after finishing my doctoral thesis on the axiology of Realist International Relations (IR) theory, which gave me the opportunity to explore Kaplan's work well beyond his writings on world politics, and thereby discover an oeuvre of an almost Aristotelian scope. There was no doubt in my mind that his systems theory had been profoundly misunderstood, and that IR, as well as other disciplines, had ignored a very consequential theoretical contribution whose value is yet to be fully appreciated in this age of partitioned and contested knowledge. I proposed to put together an anthology of his writings that would showcase the thematic scope and synoptic coherence of his thought – a cohesive philosophical system he had never explicitly presented as such, leaving his works to a fragmented audience trapped in the compartmentalisation of academic disciplines.

His first reaction was to decline: he was 87 years old and physically fragile, and had spent over five decades being thoroughly misunderstood by successive generations of IR theorists – a problem that the overwhelming original success of his *System and Process* (1957), an acknowledged 'classic' in the field, only made worse as his systems theory was either hailed or criticised precisely for what it was not: a positivist contribution. Why would any new iteration of his perspective find any different reaction at a time when IR theory seemed to be stuck between the inconsistencies of fashionable Waltzianism and the nihilist flirtations of postmodernism?

I pushed him a bit more. Having spent several months immersing myself in his writings, from epistemology and the philosophy of language and history to the analysis of legal systems and animal rights, I had been struck by the beauty of Kaplan's stubbornness in pursuing his intellectual project with no concern for fashionable trends or for keeping his place under the spotlight of high-profile disciplinary debates. There was a visibly powerful ethos underpinning his endeavour, an ethos that manifested itself in rigour rather than flamboyance. I was no systems theory enthusiast and his style and intentions were often difficult to penetrate. The transdisciplinary knowledge required to understand him fully and engage with the full scope of his work was a challenge of its own, one for which no contemporary university curriculum could provide adequate preparation. But in the landscape of 'major thinkers' that populate our textbooks and inspire our intellectual pursuits, Kaplan's original, ambitious, and demanding voice was missing, and this made no sense to me.

So I sent him a piece I had written that included a comparison of his epistemological and axiological positions with those of Hans Morgenthau and

Kenneth Waltz. He responded immediately: I understood him, he was eager to start. He was 87 years old and physically fragile, but in the following five years during which we worked on this project his intellectual vigour was overwhelming. So were his kindness, his generosity, his uncompromising perfectionism, and his disarming selflessness.

Transcending Postmodernism was published in December 2013, having developed over the years into a cohesive selection of original pieces and thoroughly revis(it)ed older ones, that were all crafted through intense discussions and Mort's careful and constant self-reassessment. We envisaged it as his final major statement on philosophy, systems theory, policy, ethics, and a whole range of interrelated themes, which it indeed turned out to be, despite my hope that some of his subsequent, privately shared reflections could also find their way to their respective audiences. I find solace in the thought that Mort was sufficiently satisfied with the volume to envisage no further public intervention. He dedicated it to his wife, Azie, the love of his life.

Between 22 April 2008 and 22 May 2016, Mort and I exchanged about four thousand emails. I am overwhelmed by their intellectual and personal content and will continue to wonder how best to pay tribute to him in the coming years. His legacy is important and substantial, and requires a dedicated institution to preserve it and carry it forward. His last email to me was ominously titled 'LAST EMAIL', though it was in reference to his previous message on how adequately to teach systems theory to university students. Prior to this we had discussed the role of technology in world politics, which Mort, ever consistent with his theoretical framework, insisted should be conceived as a boundary condition for the functioning of social systems. I regret that our final exchange was purely intellectual, as my last message inquiring about his health remained unanswered. By then his eyesight had gotten significantly worse, and he stopped writing when Azie's own health failed her.

In hindsight our collaboration was miraculous given Mort's declining physical state. Worried that he might not survive to complete the book, he had urged me to visit him soon after we started working on it. It was in November 2008. We met several times at his home in Chicago, and the first recollection of his earliest memories had an unexpectedly emotional impact on me. Mort was born in Philadelphia, the child of Jewish Eastern-European émigrés. His childhood was not unhappy but it was materially harsh, and it shaped his reflections on ethical behaviour and social policy in major ways. He was a staunch patriot, insisting on serving in the US Army from 1943 to 1946, despite having been assessed as physically unfit for combat – the result of poor nutrition in his formative years. He often considered that his subsequent career owed more to a series of serendipitous episodes than to his intellectual abilities, which alone could not defeat the social obstacles placed along his path. Originally of a poor socio-economic background, he would not have had his chance at higher education without the opportunities afforded by the G.I. Bill; as a fresh Jewish graduate in the early 1950s, he had felt his chances of getting a university

position were limited to non-existent, and often attributed his first academic job to pure chance. He graduated from Columbia University in 1951 with a PhD on the legal thought of Morris Cohen and an impressive regional track record as a professional bridge player.

His academic career really took off at the University of Chicago, in an environment that was stimulating professionally and socially more tolerant of inter-racial marriages than others in the US at the time. There, he developed a groundbreaking research programme, while the social sciences were undergoing a profound change that was to affect US academic culture in lasting ways. It is impossible to understand Kaplan's oeuvre without this intellectual context. While disciplinary boundaries and debates continued to re-align themselves along different organisational and philosophical rationales in the following decades, Kaplan was dedicated to an intellectual project wherein such partitions made no sense. Paradigms shifted and new debates emerged, but his project continued on its own terms, overflowing artificial disciplinary boundaries. For this reason it deploys itself as an imposing, demanding, and original legacy.

In his sociological study of global networks of philosophical innovation since Antiquity, Randall Collins demonstrates how intellectual influence is hard to predict several generations down the line. None of the 'great thinkers' currently monopolising academic attention is guaranteed to survive in the near future or make it into the next century as a major or respected intellectual influence. Most will be forgotten, remembered only as transitional or anomalous figures, while previously or presently forgotten, invisible, or underestimated thinkers will structurally emerge as prophets of the coming age. Relevance is contextual, and in the here and now of our socio-intellectual malaise, Kaplan's oeuvre is worth reading anew. It carries a profound concern for the human condition and a belief in the value of responsible, rigorous, and recursive (self-)knowledge. It also challenges us to address our existential problems away from both defeatist and irresponsibly utopian extremes – a standard worth upholding as intellectual life is swept along by ideological fervours on all sides.

Mort Kaplan was an agnostic – the only position consistent with his philosophy of knowledge – but also a careful interpreter of the nature and regulative roles of cultural, religious, and normative values and systems. He found in Hillel's saying a rational standard of communal and ethical life that has inspired his own choices, including the friendship he so generously offered me: 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, what am I? If not now, then when?'